PITTA

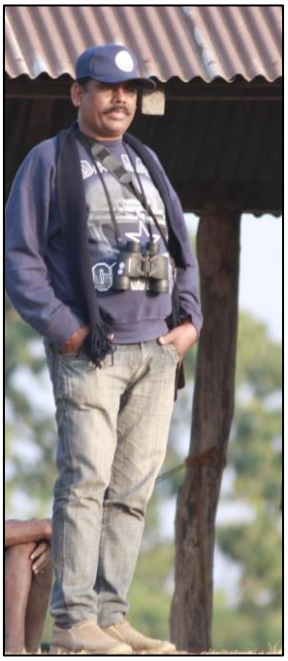
Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 17 Number 10 August 2020

DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

GOD BE WITH YE, ASHOK!

JVD Moorty



Deccan Birders has lost a dedicated birder, friend and member. G Ashok Kumar passed away on August 14, 2020 after a heart attack in the hours after having partaken dinner with his family. This was the only illness he suffered in his life.

Ashok was a warm, welcoming, and kind person with a positive outlook on life and a fundamental faith in humanity. He could always put you at ease with his candour and there wasn't a person who did not feel close to him. He loved to tell stories and his one-liners never failed to raise a laugh.

Ashok had a passion for bird watching, ever since he became a member in the year 2000, and he combined his other hobby – photography – with his love for nature. There wasn't a single birding camp, either in India or abroad, that he missed. His quick wit, infectious smile, and kind and compassionate spirit will be remembered by all. He was persistent about inviting our birders to Nizamabad, and a wonderful host – he always ensured that food and hospitality were the best. He last played host to a small group of birders in February 2020.

His passion for nature led him to the founding of an NGO in Nizamabad, the Maya Foundation, which works towards the promotion of sustainable development. His love for learning shows in his establishing and running a school as well, and all this while pursuing his career as a banker with the Syndicate Bank. While he regretted his lack of mastery over English, he was still very proud of his Telugu heritage.

He leaves behind a grieving wife, son and daughter.

May his soul find eternal peace.

BIRDING THE HEARTLAND OF INDIA

Report: Satpuda Tiger Reserve, April & December 2019

Text & Photos: Abhishek Shroti

Satpuda Tiger Reserve

सतपुड़ा के घने जंगल।
नींद मे डूबे हुए से
ऊँघते अनमने जंगल।

अजगरों से भरे जंगल।
अगम,गति से परे जंगल
सात-सात पहाड़ वाले,
बड़े छोटे झाड़ वाले,
शेर वाले बाघ वाले,
गरज और दहाड़ वाले,
कम्प से कनकने जंगल,
नींद मे डूबे हुए से
ऊँघते अनमने जंगल।

एक सागर जानते हो,
उसे कैसा मानते हो?
ठीक वैसे घने जंगल,
नींद मे डूबे हुए से
ऊँघते अनमने जंगल|

The dense forests of Satpura,
The sleepy, gloomy, wild forests...

Python-infested, inaccessible, wilderness beyond speed,
With seven mountains, big and small trees,
With tigers and leopards,
The forests reverberating with their Thunder and roar,
The sleepy, gloomy, wild forests...

Do you know an ocean?
How do you imagine it?
Forests just as dense as the ocean
The sleepy, gloomy, wild forests...

Source: https://kaavyaalaya.org/satpura_ke_ghane_jungle
(Translated into English by Abhishek Shroti)

My narration of a recent trip to Satpura Tiger Reserve could not be complete without this beautiful poem by the legendary poet, Shri Bhavani Prasad Mishra. Ever since my childhood days, the verses of this poem have enticed me into visiting these forests and, possibly, have played a role in drawing me towards nature.

Since my last visit in 1992, I have had two opportunities to visit these forests in quick succession. My first trip, in April 2019, was to the northern end of the forests near Madhai, and the next, in December of the same year, to a famous hill station named Pachmarhi, also called the "Queen of Satpura". Both the trips were short but quite fulfilling in terms of enjoying nature and watching birds. Let me first start with the trip to Madhai.

MADHAI

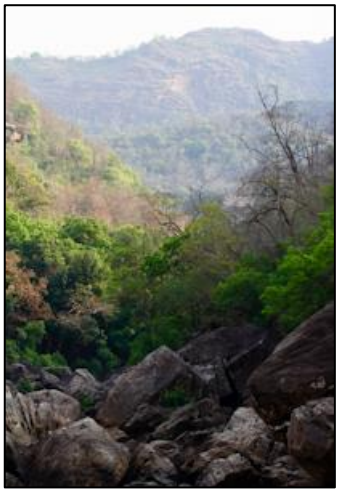
Bison Resort

Place of stay – We stayed at Bison Resort - an excellent place. However, there are several other options, including the Forest Department guest house at the edge of the forest.

Nearest Airports – Jabalpur and Bhopal (a 4-hour journey by road from either place)

Nearest Railway Station – Sohagpur on the Itarsi-Jabalpur line

Dense forests of Madhai, where the safaris take place



Sonbhadra River

We went to Madhai in April 2019, not generally considered the best time to visit the place. Since this area offers a varied topography of backwaters and dense forests, a visit during January to March can be very fulfilling in terms of watching birds. When we went there, there was hardly any water in the dam, but with whatever little water it had, we saw a great variety of birds.

River Lapwing

Red-wattled Lapwing

Black-bellied Tern

Woolly-necked Stork

A detailed list is given at the end of the article, but some of the highlights among the birds we saw near the water were:

- Terns – River Tern, Whiskered Tern, Little Tern and Black-bellied Tern;
- Lapwings – Red-wattled Lapwing and River Lapwing;
- Storks – Asian Openbill and Woolly-necked Stork;
- Ducks – Garganey, Knob-billed Duck, Indian Spot-billed Duck and Ruddy Shelduck;
- Stints – Little Stint & Temminck's Stint;
- Egyptian Vulture;
- Yellow Wagtail, etc.

Ruddy Shelduck

Temminck's Stint and Little Ringed Plover

Yellow Wagtail

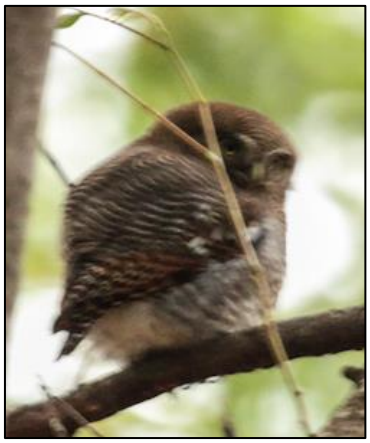
The trip to the forest was, essentially, a tiger safari. Hence, birding was basically done from the vehicle. These forests are truly impressive with a great variety of flora and fauna.

Sloth Bear quenching its thirst

We could see a number of Gaur, Sambhar, Spotted Deer, Indian Giant Squirrels and a Sloth Bear. Unfortunately, we could not spot any tigers.

The river valley where tigers are often seen

Sal forests of Satpuda, possibly the easternmost Sal forests in India



Jungle Owlet

Indian Scops Owl

Mottled Wood Owl

But the trip *was* quite satisfying from the bird perspective. Some of the other birds we spotted were:

- Owls – Jungle Owlet, Indian Scops Owl and Mottled Wood Owl;
- Raptors – Crested Serpent Eagle, Oriental Honey-buzzard, White-eyed Buzzard, Changeable Hawk Eagle and Indian Vulture;
- Minivets – Small Minivet and Scarlet Minivet;
- Tits – Cinereous Tit and Indian Yellow Tit;
- Puff-throated Babbler; etc.

Oriental Honey-buzzard

Puff-throated Babbler

Crested Serpent Eagle

Natural salt flats where animals lick the mud to obtain minerals

There is a lot to explore here, including a night safari in the buffer zone and the huge expanse of agriculture fields that have their own wonders including large herds of Blackbuck.

Chestnut-shouldered Petronia

Mugger (aka Marsh Crocodile)

A Tree Frog at Bison Resort

A complete list of birds seen during this trip is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Knob-billed Duck	*Sarkidiornis melanotos*	36	Oriental Honey-buzzard	*Pernis ptilorhynchus*
2	Ruddy Shelduck	*Tadorna ferruginea*	37	Indian Vulture	*Gyps indicus*
3	Garganey	*Anas querquedula*	38	Crested Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis cheela*
4	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	39	Changeable Hawk Eagle	*Nisaetus (cirrhatus) limnaeetus*
5	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	40	White-eyed Buzzard	*Butastur teesa*
6	Grey Junglefowl	*Gallus sonneratii*	41	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*
7	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Stretopelia decaocto*	42	Indian Scops Owl	*Otus bakkamoena*
8	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	*Treron phoenicopterus*	43	Jungle Owlet	*Glaucidium radiatum*
9	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	44	Mottled Wood Owl	*Strix ocellata*
10	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*	45	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros griseus*
11	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	46	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
12	River Lapwing	*Vanellus duvaucelii*	47	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
13	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	48	Pied Kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*
14	Little Ringed Plover	*Charadrius dubius*	49	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*
15	Kentish Plover	*Charadrius alexandrinus*	50	Indian Roller	*Coracias benghalensis*
16	Temminck's Stint	*Calidris temminckii*	51	Yellow-crowned Woodpecker	*Dendrocopos mahrattensis*
17	Little Stint	*Calidris minuta*	52	White-naped Woodpecker	*Chrysocolaptes festivus*
18	Common Greenshank	*Tringa nebularia*	53	Black-rumped Flameback	*Dinopium benghalense*
19	Wood Sandpiper	*Tringa glareola*	54	Plum-headed Parakeet	*Psittacula cyanocephala*
20	Little Tern	*Sternula albifrons*	55	Small Minivet	*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
21	Whiskered Tern	*Chlidonias hybrida*	56	Scarlet Minivet	*Pericrocotus (flammeus) speciosus*
22	Black-bellied Tern	*Sterna acuticauda*	57	Large Cuckooshrike	*Coracina macei*
23	River Tern	*Sterna aurantia*	58	Black-hooded Oriole	*Oriolus xanthornus*
24	Asian Openbill	*Anastomus oscitans*	59	Common Woodshrike	*Tephrodornis pondicerianus*
25	Woolly-necked Stork	*Ciconia episcopus*	60	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
26	Little Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax niger*	61	White-bellied Drongo	*Dicrurus caerulescens*
27	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	62	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	*Dicrurus paradiseus*
28	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*	63	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*
29	Great Egret	*Casmerodius albus*	64	Cinereous Tit	*Parus cinereus*
30	Intermediate Egret	*Mesophoyx intermedia*	65	Indian Yellow Tit	*Parus (xanthogenys) aplonotus*
31	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	66	Oriental Skylark	*Alauda gulgula*
32	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*	67	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*
33	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	68	Grey-breasted Prinia	*Prinia hodgsonii*
34	Red-naped Ibis	*Pseudibis papillosa*	69	Blyth's Reed Warbler	*Acrocephalus dumetorum*
35	Egyptian Vulture	*Neophron percnopterus*	70	Puff-throated Babbler	*Pellorneum ruficeps*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
71	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*	76	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
72	Orange-headed Thrush	*Zoothera citrina*	77	Chestnut-shouldered Petronia	*Gymnoris xanthocollis*
73	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*	78	Western Yellow Wagtail	*Motacilla flava*
74	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*	79	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*
75	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	*Cyornis tickelliae*	80	Paddyfield Pipit	*Anthus rufulus*

PACHMARHI

View en route to Dhoopgarh

Place of stay – Woodland Adventure Resort. An excellent stay, but there are several other options including some MP Tourism properties that are phenomenal

Nearest Airports – Jabalpur and Bhopal (a 4-hour journey by road from either place)

Nearest Railway Station – Piparia on the Itarsi-Jabalpur line

Bee Falls stream

View of forest and valley from Bee Falls

My wife and I went to Piparia by train from Jabalpur and drove one and a half hours from there to Pachmarhi. We were in Pachmarhi from December 29 to 31, 2019, and the primary purpose was sightseeing and birding. It is a scenic place with several nice waterfalls and places of natural beauty. The tiger safari has been restarted from Pachmarhi side (Pannerpani gate). We took the safari but the primary attraction for me was to just experience the forest.

Ancient coffee plantation inside the forest

Eurasian Hoopoe

The forests are very rich in medicinal plants and the tribes of this region have been caretakers of this knowledge for centuries. Some of the villages that we visited, which were relocated when the Reserve was formed, are so deep inside the forest that it is difficult to imagine how the villagers remained connected with the outside world.

I was mesmerised to see huge wild mango trees and creepers around them. These forests are in a hilly terrain and in many parts the sunlight could not reach even until 11:00AM.

Black-shouldered Kite

Malabar Pied Hornbill

My biggest surprise, right at the beginning of the safari, was a pair of Malabar Pied Hornbills that were feeding on the Banyan trees. I wasn't aware of their presence in Satpura and was pleasantly surprised to see them. Only later did I realize that they were quite common in these forests and could be seen even in Pachmarhi town!

Shikra

Sambhar

Due to the dense nature of the forests, it was very hard to see many wild animals but we did manage to see a group of Barking Deer, Sambhar, Indian Giant Squirrels and a couple of Wild Dogs (Dholes).

Sunset at Dhoopgarh

Hills of Satpuda, seen from Dhoopgarh sunset point

On the second morning in Pachmarhi, we dropped the idea of going on a tiger safari and, instead, my wife and I went for a walk to the town. It is a beautiful hill station with the old, British-era cantonment feel.

Lake in Pachmarhi town

Indian Yellow Tit

There is a lake in the middle of the town where we saw some birds. On the way back it started raining, so we took shelter in Bison Lodge Museum. The Cheer (Pine) trees there were beautiful and we could see a couple of Indian Yellow Tits too. We also visited the MP Silk Federation; the place was closed but the guard there was courteous enough to show us mulberry plantations and also share his knowledge about the process of producing silk. It was fascinating!

Dhoopgarh cliffs, nesting site for Indian Vultures

One of the best sightings in Pachmarhi was that of the Indian Vultures. We saw them almost every day at different places, including Dhoopgarh, the highest point in MP-Chhattisgarh, where they nest on the cliffs.

Indian Vulture

Yellow-footed Green Pigeon

Bonelli's Eagle

Egyptian Vulture

Crested Serpent Eagle

Some of the birds we saw were:

- Yellow-footed Green Pigeons;
- Indian Grey Hornbill and Malabar Pied Hornbills;
- Grey Junglefowl and Painted Spurfowl;
- Oriental Turtle Doves, Red Collared Doves, Eurasian Collared Doves, Spotted Doves and Laughing Doves;
- Bonelli's Eagle and Crested Serpent Eagle;
- Egyptian Vultures and Indian Vultures;
- Red-breasted and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher;
- Brown-headed Barbet and Coppersmith Barbets;
- Jerdon's Leafbird, etc.

Red-breasted Flycatcher

A complete list of birds seen during this trip is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	30	Jungle Owlet	*Glaucidium radiatum*
2	Painted Spurfowl	*Galloperdix lunulata*	31	Eurasian Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*
3	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	32	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Ocyceros griseus*
4	Grey Junglefowl	*Gallus sonneratii*	33	Malabar Pied Hornbill	*Anthracoceros coronatus*
5	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*	34	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
6	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	35	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
7	Oriental Turtle Dove	*Stretopelia orientalis*	36	Pied Kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*
8	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Stretopelia decaocto*	37	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*
9	Red Collared Dove	*Stretopelia tranquebarica*	38	Indian Roller	*Coracias benghalensis*
10	Spotted Dove	*Stigmatopelia chinensis*	39	Coppersmith Barbet	*Megalaima haemacephala*
11	Laughing Dove	*Stigmatopelia senegalensis*	40	Brown-headed Barbet	*Megalaima zeylanica*
12	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	*Treron phoenicopterus*	41	Eurasian Kestrel	*Falco tinnunculus*
13	Greater Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	42	Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus (oriolus) kundoo*
14	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	43	Indian Paradise-flycatcher	*Terpsiphone paradisi*
15	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*	44	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*
16	Grey-headed Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	45	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
17	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	46	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*
18	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	47	Cinereous Tit	*Parus cinereus*
19	Green Sandpiper	*Tringa ochropus*	48	Indian Yellow Tit	*Parus (xanthogenys) aplonotus*
20	Woolly-necked Stork	*Ciconia episcopus*	49	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*
21	Great Egret	*Casmerodius albus*	50	Lesser Whitethroat	*Sylvia curruca*
22	Red-naped Ibis	*Pseudibis papillosa*	51	Common Babbler	*Turdoides caudata*
23	Egyptian Vulture	*Neophron percnopterus*	52	Large Grey Babbler	*Turdoides malcolmi*
24	Indian Vulture	*Gyps indicus*	53	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
25	Crested Serpent Eagle	*Spilornis cheela*	54	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	*Cyornis tickelliae*
26	Bonelli's Eagle	*Aquila fasciata*	55	Red-breasted Flycatcher	*Ficedula parva*
27	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	56	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata*
28	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	57	Jerdon's Leafbird	*Chloropsis jerdoni*
29	Black-shouldered Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*	58	Grey Wagtail	*Motacilla cinerea*

Chouragarh Shiv Mandir

Eurasian Kestrel

Both these trips were short but very memorable. I am looking forward to going back to Satpura at the earliest opportunity. In fact, for anyone interested in learning about the native wildlife and tribal culture of Central India, a trip to Satpura Tiger Reserve is a must. If you have enough time, you can visit Patalkot to see some of the oldest tribal villages that were cut off from the mainstream for centuries, take a walk inside the forest from Pannerpani gate and visit the herbal garden, or check out cave paintings and ancient coffee plantations.

Indian Paradise-flycatcher

Common Babbler

Birding, even if just a by-product of your trip, will still be quite fulfilling! After all, the poet also says:

धँसो इनमें डर नहीं है,
मौत का यह घर नहीं है,
उतर कर बहते अनेकों,
कल-कथा कहते अनेकों,
नदी, निर्झर और नाले,
इन वनों ने गोद पाले।

लाख पंछी सौ हिरन-दल,
चाँद के कितने किरन दल,
झूमते बन-फूल, फ़लियाँ,
खिल रहीं अज्ञात कलियाँ,
हरित दूर्वा, रक्त किसलय,
पूत, पावन, पूर्ण रसमय
सतपुड़ा के घने जंगल,
लताओं के बने जंगल।

Go deep, no need to fear,
This is not a house of death,
Experience the expressions
Of the many rivers, creeks and springs
Adopted by these forests...

Come here to witness
A million birds and hundreds of deer herds,
And the countless rays of moon;
Watch the pure and divine dance of wild
flowers, the buds, the green grass and the red
lotuses...
The dense forests of Satpura,
Jungle made of vines.

Some other photos taken during these trips:

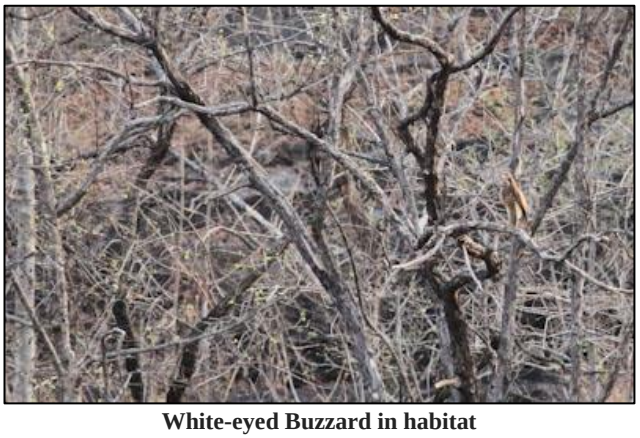
Indian Gaur Adult Male (L) and a few-weeks-old Calf (R)

Nilgai Male (L) and Female (R)

Sambhar Male

Cheetal Male

Chausingha (aka Four-horned Antelope)



White-eyed Buzzard in habitat

Grey Langur with young

Indian Giant Squirrel

Green Marsh Hawk

Yellow-crowned Woodpecker

Large Cuckooshrike

Common Kingfisher and
Oriental Magpie Robin

Grey Junglefowl Male (L) and Female (R)

Little Tern and White-browed Wagtail

Indian Peafowl (Male)

Common Hawk Cuckoo

Crested Serpent Eagle

Scarlet Minivet

Indian Pond Heron

Oriental Honey-buzzard

Plum-headed Parakeet Male (L) and Female (R)

Blyth's Reed Warbler

Black-rumped Flameback

Little Ringed Plover

Green Sandpiper

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo

White-breasted Kingfisher

Common Woodshrike

Tickell's Blue Flycatcher

Pied Kingfisher

Common Kingfisher

Common Tailorbird

Wood Sandpiper

Indian Jungle Crow chasing Bonelli's Eagle

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Notes on Sighting of Rufous-bellied Eagle in Telangana and its Status in Eastern Ghats

Srikanth Bhamidipati, Humayun Taher, Sudhir Moorti, Gokul Krishna Addanki, Lawrence Mathappan, Rishi Reddy (7 Yrs)

Rufous-bellied Eagle (Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

The Rufous-bellied Eagle (*Lophotriorchis kienerii*) is a bird of prey in the family *Accipitridae* that is found in the forested regions of tropical Asia. Relatively small for eagles and contrastingly patterned like a falcon, this species was earlier placed in the genus *Hieraaetus*.

Adult Rufous-bellied Eagles are very distinctive in the field. They have a black hood with a short crest. Chestnut underparts and wing coverts contrast with the white on the throat and breast. The sexes are similar, but females are slightly larger and have more black on the face. They perch in a very upright stance and the wingtips almost reach the end of the tail. The tarsi are fully feathered. Juveniles have very white underparts with dark markings on the sides of the body, head mask and edge of underwing coverts. They can appear similar to a light-phase Booted Eagle (*Aquila pennata*). In flight, the underwing lining is dark and the greater coverts are black. The flight feathers are thinly barred with a black edge, and the tail is dark and barred.

The species is traditionally known from the Western Ghats. The distribution, as given in the Handbook (Ali & Ripley, 1987) is "Resident. With a curiously discontinuous Indo-Malayan distribution: Eastern Himalayas from (Nepal?), Sikkim to E. Assam, Manipur, E. Pakistan; the Western Ghats strip in South India from *c*. Goa and N. Mysore through Kerala (up to *c*. 1200 m), and Ceylon (all zones). Absent in the intervening country."

On a recent visit to Umamaheshwaram temple area in the Nallamala Hills on June 13, 2020, a single adult Rufous-bellied Eagle was sighted in flight. Photographs were taken and the sighting was very clear. This sighting prompted us to go further into the details of the distribution of this species in the Eastern Ghats, and several records started to emerge. Almost a month later, there was another sighting of a juvenile bird from Adilabad District on July 11, 2020 by a Forest Department official.

GARP Predictive Models, using a computational procedure with 16 records (Shyamal, 2007) showed a strong probability of the species also occurring in the Eastern Ghats, even though the original subset of 16 records did not include any records from the Eastern Ghats as, at that time, the only published record was a sighting from the Tirumala Hills by members of the then BSAP (Taher, 1992). So even though the species was not supposedly found in the Eastern Ghats, it was likely that the stray record from the Tirumala Hills was not just a vagrant. However, over time there were very few records that came in from the Eastern Ghats strip, so the single record stood as a vagrant sighting.

Records from our own sightings from the Eastern Ghats are given in the below table:

Number	Date of Sighting	Location	Region
1	August 25, 1990	Japali, Tirumala Hills	Eastern Ghats
1	October 10, 2016	Maredumilli Forest	Eastern Ghats
1	November 13, 2016	Japali, Tirumala Hills	Eastern Ghats
1	August 13, 2017	Maredumilli Forest	Eastern Ghats
1	June 13, 2020	Umamaheshwaram, Nallamala Hills	Eastern Ghats

The availability of eBird records has significantly helped in getting details of other sightings of this species, and we have found several records from the Eastern Ghats strip. Mapping these sightings along the Eastern Ghats, we can see that the data covers almost the entire range. However, we cannot discount the Western Ghats records; more so because this species was originally predominantly known only from the Western Ghats. There are close to 750 sightings and records in eBird, and these covers all of the calendar months. There are also confirmed breeding records from the Kerala region.

Another interesting – and important – observation we made, based on the data from personal records and from eBird, was that the species may well be a resident in Eastern Ghats, with sightings during 10 months of the year (all months excepting September and December).

Map showing sightings recorded in the Eastern Ghats

Although the current data set from the Eastern Ghats is not exhaustive, it still allows us to make a reasonable assumption that the Rufous-bellied Eagle has two different populations in Southern India, and that the sightings from the eastern regions point to the probability of there being a separate and distinct population of the species in the Eastern Ghats. Additional records from the region would be extremely interesting and may help to strengthen this argument.

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4) Map courtesy: Google Earth (Version 9.3.114.1)

5) Data sets: eBird – extracted on 8-Jul-2020

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Notes on Observation of a Melanistic Large Grey Babbler in and around Hyderabad

Text and Photos: Humayun Taher

Melanistic Large Grey Babbler

In the second week of August, there was a discussion on the Deccan Birders WhatsApp group on colour aberrations in avian species, with particular reference to leucism and melanism in birds. I pointed out a couple of old, known photographic records of melanistic (or at least dark-coloured) birds and the discussion sparked off other members also sharing their own sightings of aberrant dark-coloured birds.

Melanism is not all that well-known amongst birds, particularly dryland birds. One of the reasons for this is that frequently the colour aberration is found to be extraneous (the most common is if the birds have been foraging in a burnt area and have become partially or fully covered in soot). However, it is instructive to note that in recent times, several instances of melanistic specimens have been recorded for different species of birds. These records occasionally appear on social media, and for a few hours there is a furious discussion and several congratulatory messages, and then the furore dies down and the record gets lost. This particular record also was in similar danger, and so I felt it would better if it were documented.

On Sunday, April 15, 2018, members of the erstwhile Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (BSAP) had visited the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad for a field trip. During this trip, towards the later part of the morning (at approximately 09:30AM) a flock of Large Grey Babblers (*Argya malcolmi*) was seen foraging on the leaf litter. This flock seemed composed of two different groups, as there were more than 11 birds around. One group of 6 was of particular interest as there were two birds in the group showing distinct melanistic properties. One of the birds was almost completely black, while the second was dark brown with a few black feathers on the flanks, quite unlike the usual dusty grey-brown plumage. In the second group of 5 birds, there was a single all-black specimen, very similar to the black one in the first group. Photographs of the birds were obtained for record.

Partially melanistic Large Grey Babbler

I was curious to see what I could find about melanism in the *Turdoides* species and did some checking online to retrieve relevant literature, via the online 'Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology' (Pittie, 2018). To my surprise, though I found some reference to albinism, I was unable to find any reference to melanism in Babblers. Wikipedia tells me that "This long-tailed and large babbler has a brown body with creamy white outer tail feathers which are easily visible as they fly with fluttery wing beats low over the ground. The lores are dark and forehead is grey with white shaft streaks on the feathers. The rump and uppertail coverts are pale grey. The mantle has dusky blotches and no shaft streaks. The three outer tail feathers are white and the fourth pair has the outer web white. The wings are dark brown. The iris is yellow and the upper mandible is dark brown, while the lower mandible is yellowish. The tail is faintly cross barred. Abnormal specimens showing albinism or leucism have been reported."

That monumental work on Indian Birds – Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan – also has no reference of melanism in the Large Grey Babblers. I checked against other babbler species and again could not find any known reference to melanistic specimens, although it seems that albino or leucistic specimens are not unknown amongst almost all the babbler species. The only known reference to melanism that I have been able to source is a possible instance in Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striata* (Pande *et al.* 2003, Mahabal *et al.* 2016).

Some other members came forward with their records (on the earlier mentioned WhatsApp thread) – Aasheesh Pittie recollects a flock seen near the Public Gardens; Srikanth Bhamidipati also remembers a flock from this area and mentioned that he has photos of his sighting also. Aasheesh further mentions a record from Banjara Hills, and Kishore Bakshi has seen one near Kokapet, and he says he might have a photograph too. All these are records of Large Grey Babblers. Even if some of these records are what might be termed 'artificial colours' (which can happen if the birds have been foraging in soot covered areas), still it seems that there is sufficient evidence here to suggest that melanism in this species might perhaps be more prevalent than is commonly supposed.

This therefore becomes an interesting record, as yet another instance of melanism in the Large Grey Babbler. I would be very keen to know if other members have any similar observations.

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4. Pittie, Aasheesh (2018): Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology. URL: http://www.southasiaornith.in. (Accessed on 16/04/2018)

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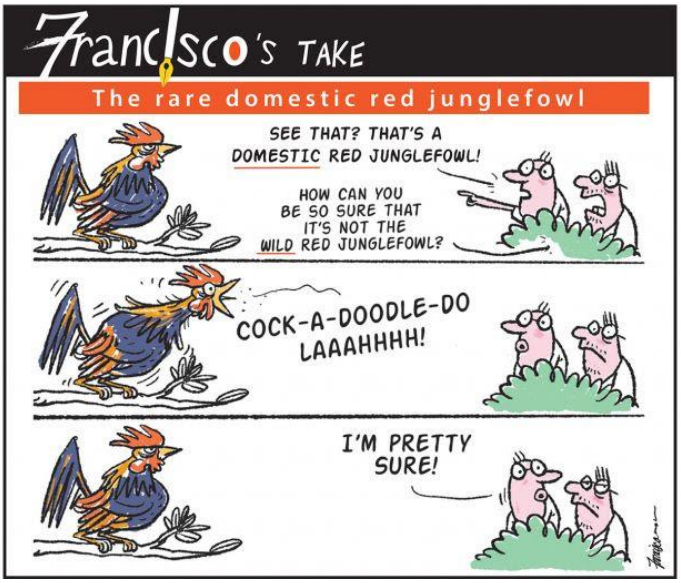
Bird Humour

Umesh Mani


Francisco's TAKE
The rare domestic red junglefowl
SEE THAT? THAT'S A DOMESTIC RED JUNGLEFOWL!
HOW CAN YOU BE SO SURE THAT IT'S NOT THE WILD RED JUNGLEFOWL?
COCK-A-DOODLE-DO LAAAHHHH!
I'M PRETTY SURE!

(From Straits Times, Singapore. Received on WhatsApp, July 9, 2020)

Bird of the Month

Umesh Mani

White-bellied Minivet (*Pericrocotus erythropygius*)

White-bellied Minivet Male
(Zaheerabad, Sangareddy Dt, July 11, 2020)
(Photo: Srikanth Bhamidipati)

White-bellied Minivet Female
(Zaheerabad, Sangareddy Dt, July 19, 2020)
(Photo: Anand Kalinadhabhatla)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Campephagidae
Genus: *Pericrocotus*
Species: *P. erythropygius*
Size: 15 cm

Description & distribution: The White-bellied Minivet is differentiated from the other Minivets by its mainly pied colouration. The male has a glossy black head, neck and upperparts, with a V-shaped white wing patch (when seen from behind) and white underparts, orange-red breast and rump, and a black tail. The female has dark grey head and upperparts with a white forehead, black wings showing white wing patches similar to the male, dark lores, white and orange rump and black tail.

The White-bellied Minivet is found in India (Peninsular India south-east of a line from Ambala to Belgaum and the Deccan in the south, and east to west Bihar and south-east Bengal) and in Nepal.

Habitat & behaviour: The White-bellied Minivet is usually seen in small groups of 6-8, in dry deciduous forest, open grassy forests, dry thorny scrub and grassy plains. It is less arboreal than the other Minivets, and is often seen coming down to the ground while foraging. Its diet consists mainly of spiders and other insects. Its flight is dipping and quite similar to that of the Wagtails. Its call is a whistling *tseep tseep*, also similar to the Wagtails.

Nesting: The White-bellied Minivet breeds generally between June and October. The nest is a small fibre cup coated with down and cobwebs, usually placed in a vertical or horizontal fork of a bush. The usual clutch consists of 3 greyish-white eggs covered with grey-brown blotches.

Local name: The White-bellied Minivet is known as *'Safed rajalal'* in Hindi, *'Kabao rajalal'* in Gujarati and '*Chitti saheli'* in Punjabi.

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